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SUBJECT: HAMEED AL-AHMAR: YEMEN'S NEXT KINGMAKER?

Classified By: AMBASSADOR THOMAS C. KRAJESKI, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Hameed al-Ahmar, son of powerful tribal leader Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, made his entry into Yemeni politics this year by increasingly distancing himself from his father's traditional alliance with President Saleh. To the surprise of many, Hameed has emerged as an articulate regime critic who enjoys a larger popular base than virtually any other oppositionist, primarily due to his powerful tribal ties and his personal fortune. Hameed bears watching as he takes his place among the next generation of Yemen's power brokers, but his implicit claim to the title of Yemen's next "kingmaker" is probably overblown -- for now. END SUMMARY

HAMEED'S DEBUTANTE BALL

¶2. (C) Over the past six months, Hameed al-Ahmar has become an increasingly vocal critic of Saleh's administration, laying out his concerns in newspaper interviews, press conferences, and qat sessions -- Yemen's daily free flowing discussions among men that take place in homes. Yemeni political observers have remarked to poloff how surprised they were to see that Hameed is articulate in both Arabic and English. In an election season dominated by what many contacts view as sterile debates about election procedures and fantastical constitutional amendments, Hameed's entry onto the political stage has piqued the interest of oppositionists and has become a cause for concern for the ruling party.

¶3. (C) Hameed's eloquence aside, family lineage and a sizeable personal fortune are the primary reasons Yemeni politicos take him seriously. Hameed is the son of the ailing Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, of which President Saleh's Sanhani tribe is a member. Abdullah, despite being the head of the Islah opposition party, has been an important ally for Saleh since 1978. Most observers believe that without Abdullah's tribal support, Saleh would not have been able to remain in power for so long. Similarly, Abdullah and his family would not have been able to amass their fortune -- and the friends it has bought -- without Saleh's staunch support. As a result of this alliance, Islah nominated Saleh as its presidential candidate during the 1999 election season, before Saleh's own party had formally nominated him.

¶4. (C) According to Hameed, that alliance is now shifting. In a private meeting with poloffs, Hameed said several times that his father's support for Saleh "is not guaranteed" this

year, and that his father "does not want to see everything he and others fought for swept away" during Saleh's next term. Many observers speculated that Sheikh Abdullah's six-month stay in Jeddah -- officially for health reasons -- was a subtle signal to Saleh and the public that 2006 would not be a re-play of 1999.

"JUST GIVE ME THE GREEN LIGHT"

¶ 15. (C) Brushing aside the issue of his father's lack of support for Saleh this election cycle, Hameed told poloffs it is "now time to look beyond Abdullah and Saleh" for the future of Yemen. A new generation is ready and able to take the reins of power, he said, in order to restore the government's role of serving the people. Saleh's rule has increasingly become a personal enterprise, with major cabinet portfolios and business deals reserved for his family and virtually no economic development or political involvement for the south.

¶ 16. (C) What Yemen needs now, Hameed asserted, is a southern presidential candidate backed by the tribes. "I can deliver the tribes," he said, "but they are very expensive." Hameed then stated that if the USG would "only give the green light to the Saudis," then he could find financing to pay off major tribal groups in exchange for their support for a southern candidate, preferably Yassin Saeed Noman, the Secretary General of the Yemeni Socialist Party.

¶ 17. (C) PolChief informed Hameed that the USG would not get involved in Yemeni politics in this fashion, but would

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continue to press the Yemeni Government to produce a free and fair election. It is now up to the opposition, PolChief emphasized, to field a serious candidate and seek broad support for him. Hameed replied that a "relatively fair election" would also result in an opposition victory -- which makes USG public support for the process crucial.

RATTLING THE SABER

¶ 18. (C) Asked what would happen if this year's election is marred with fraud, Hameed replied that "war is possible." He said there was no question that he would lead the opposition in calling supporters into the streets in protest. "We will not be violent," he emphasized, but said clashes instigated by Saleh's Republican Guard would be inevitable.

¶ 19. (C) The problem with Saleh, Hameed continued, is that he is Janus-faced. "One side of Saleh truly wants to be a democrat, but the other side cannot stand the thought of anyone more popular than him -- and that is the side that is winning," he explained. The conflict between the two sides has grown to the point that Saleh is no longer the rational leader he once was, which is why it is time for a new man to take power with the backing of the tribes.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (C) COMMENT: Hameed's idea of uniting powerful armed tribal groups around a credible southern politician appears to be the closest anyone in Yemen has come to suggesting a truly national campaign that could present a challenge to Saleh. The likelihood that it will happen is slim. Saleh will seek to keep the tribes in check by sowing discord among them -- a tactic he has successfully used for three decades. He may even lean on Sheikh Abdullah to gain the support of the Hashid Confederation once again, despite what Hameed may want. Whether or not Hameed and his supporters can bring

protestors into the street if the elections are marred by serious fraud is anyone's guess.

¶11. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: We suspect that, for all his bluster, Hameed is actually setting his sights on the next presidential election, not this one. Sanaa is rife with rumors about how Saleh will engineer putting his widely disliked son Ahmed in the presidential chair sometime during his next term. Hameed is likely using this election cycle to test the political waters and build tribal and political alliances in order to be in a stronger position to oppose Ahmed's ascendancy.

Krajeski